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E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: IAEA: WHAT IS BEING DONE IN FOOD SECURITY

SUMMARY

1. (U) The IAEA has played an important if obscure role in securing the world's food supply for nearly fifty years. Its projects have addressed a wide variety of agricultural concerns and provided innovative solutions using nuclear technology. In partnership with FAO, the Vienna-based Joint Division has sought to improve the role of nuclear techniques "from farm to fork". Nuclear techniques have improved crops, helped farmers plant more efficiently, and eliminated deadly insect pests. These programs have had a tangible impact on agriculture in many nations. The decades-old partnership was recently fully reinstated after a failed attempt by Member States in Rome to save money by canceling the Joint Division. Thanks to stalwart support from the G-77, the Joint Division survived and its leadership has taken steps to win back the good graces of its more skeptical supporters (which include the U.S.). Mission suggests that USAID and USDA/FAS consider closer cooperation with the IAEA/FAO Joint Division in order to strengthen its relevance and increase the impact of its work using nuclear techniques for agricultural development.

WHO DOES IT?

2. (U) Food security at the IAEA is managed by the Joint FAO/IAEA Division of Nuclear Techniques in Food and Agriculture (NAFA), a joint venture by the IAEA Department of Nuclear Sciences and Applications and FAO Agriculture and Consumer Protection Department. The Division is comprised of five research sections: (1) Animal production and health; (2) Soil and water management and crop nutrition; (3) Plant breeding and genetics; (4) Insect pest control; and, (5) Food and environmental protection. Laboratory work is performed at the FAO/IAEA Agriculture and Biotechnology Laboratory in Seibersdorf, Austria. The division employs seventy-one IAEA staffers and twenty-four FAO staffers. The 21-24 million Euro budget provides funding for approximately 50 training courses, 40 applied research projects, and nearly 250 technical cooperation projects each year.

STRONGER CROPS

3. (U) The Joint Division focuses heavily on research related to the use of radiation to accelerate mutations, a natural phenomenon, in crops. The Joint Division has identified mutations which increase plant yield, shorten the cultivation period, increase disease resistance, and allow plants to survive in hostile environments. The Joint Division has used such breakthroughs to

implement IAEA Technical Cooperation (TC) projects focused on improving rice, banana, and sorghum harvests using bio-fortified strains. There are approximately fifty active TC projects in Plant Breeding and Genetics. According to TC experts, projects in this area provide billions of dollars per year in additional income for farmers. Aside from the TC projects, a NAFA sub-program trains approximately one hundred scientists and hosts over thirty interns and fellows per year from mostly developing countries on nuclear techniques.

SOIL AND WATER

¶4. (U) IAEA scientists also use nuclear techniques to monitor relevant soil properties, allowing optimal land use by farmers. For instance, radioisotopes permit the Agency to track the movement of both pollutants and nutrients within the soil over time. Accurate mapping of these elements has greatly increased land use efficiency and prevented soil degradation in a number of developing countries. The NAFA soil and water management and crop nutrition sub-program works to also improve agricultural water use through accurate measurements of soil moisture levels. The IAEA has found that the impact of even a small improvement in water use is quite large because approximately seventy-five percent of global fresh water is used by agriculture. One of the direct results that the IAEA cites in this area is a global savings of 6 billion USD in fertilizer use per annum.

PROTECTING

¶5. (U) Sterile insect technique (SIT) has been used by the IAEA to help countries eliminate insect pests for over forty years. Flies and moths destroy crops and can infect humans and livestock with potentially fatal diseases such as trypanosomosis. SIT eliminates insect populations by overwhelming the wild female insects with farm-raised, radiation-sterilized males. Fly-free zones have been certified in many parts of South and Central America as well as the Arava Valley in the Middle East and the Hex River Valley in South Africa, permitting produce grown in those areas to avoid quarantine measures. Internationally recognized fly-free zones are estimated to have yielded billions of dollars in economic benefits for farmers. There are currently 49 active TC projects involving SIT in all four major TC regions. Researchers are applying their experience eradicating Tsetse on Zanzibar to nations on mainland Africa. Current projects assist countries like Ethiopia, which has lost 15% of its arable lowlands to Tsetse infestation. At the recent IAEA Future of the Agency meeting on TC (June 29-30, 2009), a few member states suggested that the SIT could be spun-off into the private sector, since the techniques are widely available and are already used commercially. The U.S. along with others continues to support the SIT program.

STILL RELEVANT?

¶6. (U) Despite these unequivocal achievements, questions remain about the Joint Division's enduring relevancy. Many of the Joint Division's technology and techniques that were cutting edge two or three decades ago have since become widely available. In some cases, the Joint Division has had difficulty withdrawing from programs where it no longer provides added value. (A UK diplomat recently cited the tse-tse fly program as one that should be scaled back for this very reason.)

¶7. (U) The Seibersdorf Lab also comes under regular scrutiny by observers who wonder if the wide range of activities performed there might not be better carried out in regional labs or canceled altogether. As a Canadian diplomat recently asked, "Why are they experimenting with banana groves in Austria? Shouldn't they be doing that in Ghana?"

¶8. (U) On the other hand, a former U.S. Agricultural Attache defends the Joint Division as an important market "catalyst." Its activities lead to the development, marketing and distribution of products in places that wouldn't normally get attention. For

example, the Joint Division recently collaborated with the U.S.-based company Smiths Detection to develop a portable test kit for avian influenza. Smiths Detection developed the technology while the Joint Division provided the funding and international contacts. (The H5N1 strain is considered a significant pandemic threat, and the poorest countries are the ones least able to manage disease control. Projects like this one support arguments in favor of the Joint Division's relevancy.)

CLOSE CALL

¶9. (U) In 2008, a group of FAO Member States in Rome (including the U.S.) proposed canceling the Joint Division as one of many cutbacks in the struggling FAO's budget. In these days of virtual communication, there were questions about the value of placing FAO employees (from Rome) at the Joint Division in Vienna. Also, by UN standards, the FAO is traditionally a "resource poor" organization compared to the IAEA, and even the FAO's token, 20 percent contribution to the Joint Division did not necessarily make fiscal sense (the IAEA picks up the remaining 80 percent). In the end, however, G-77 support for the Joint Division remains stalwart, effectively squashing the effort to reduce or radically alter the partnership. Indeed, the debate over survival of the Joint Division became a litmus test for the many developing countries that complain of U.S. and developed country efforts to play up the IAEA's "watch dog" status at the expense of its promotional role.

¶10. (U) Referring back to the struggle, IAEA Deputy Director General David Waller asserted that the Joint Division was a victim of poor public relations. Last year's attempt to downgrade the relationship was, in Waller's view, born of ignorance about the Joint Division's true contributions. Over the past year, IAEA Deputy Director General Werner Burkhardt has gone out of his way to win back the good graces of Member States in both Rome and Vienna. He has traveled to Rome periodically for discussions on IAEA and has proposed a strategic review to determine "core" work as opposed to work that is sufficiently mature and could be opened up to extrabudgetary support. In Vienna, glossy pamphlets have appeared that tout the accomplishments of the Joint Division. In the aftermath of the struggle, UNVIE remains a "skeptical supporter" of the Joint Division's work, recognizing this as part of the overall bargain that makes the IAEA's enforcement/verification role stronger.

POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIP

¶11. (U) Given that many of the Joint Division's projects have a direct impact on development, USAID and USDA/FAS may wish to consider potential partnership/synergies with the program. USAID and USDA's more visible involvement would also promote the continuing relevance of the Division's work and, ultimately, enhance its impact on agricultural development. The Division's work aligns closely with goals enumerated in the 2004 USAID Agricultural strategy, which include "expand public and private sector partnerships and networks to facilitate collaboration on applied research activities" and "support the development and application of environmental assessment technologies". Through its joint FY 2004-09 Strategic Plan with USAID, the Department also declares that "we will promote the adoption in low-income countries of new technologies deriving from agricultural research and development by mobilizing science and technology from developed as well as developing countries." A closer partnership on a global, country, or TC project specific level could serve to advance USG interests in food security as well as sustainable development. Mission would welcome further consultation with USAID and USDA on the work of the FAO/IAEA Joint Division.

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